

WEEKEND GETAWAY

Volcanic history shapes otherworldly terrain at peak of hiker's paradise



PHOTOGRAPHER BY JOSH WILSON — SPECIAL TO VENTURE

Jeffrey pines dress the slopes of Mt. Lassen on the summit trail

From muddy hell to clear blue sky on Lassen's trails

BY JOSH WILSON

Special to Venture

I FOLLOWED the freak summer storm up from Lake Tahoe along Highway 89 North, the brief swaths of rain-soaked highway and countryside like the trail of some large and potentially dangerous animal. The road threaded through tall evergreens, past rolling fields and one or two horses. The views were often startlingly beautiful: a railroad trestle straddling a gorge, pine-clad peaks giving way to sweeping views of the foothills and the Sacramento Valley beyond.

But the sky was temperamental, first obscured by the hazy,

er density of visitors than Yosemite and Tahoe, make for an appealing destination.

I was lucky, arriving under clear skies, the storm continuing its journey elsewhere. Only two of the five campgrounds were full, and that was on an August weekend. Despite the late hour of my arrival, the walk-in campground by the



Gases bubble up through the mud near the Bumpass Hell boardwalk.

...ured by the lazy, the dumplings fell downwalk,
sweet-smelling smoke
of the forest fires deeper into
the Sierra, then filled with
heavy, fast-moving rain clouds.
The storm seemed to be headed
for Lassen Volcanic National
Park, also my destination,
though I hoped its visit would
be much shorter.

The park can be reached by
lateral highways off Interstate
5, near Redding, or by the far
more scenic drive up 89 from
Truckee. The hiking is abun-
dant, and there are several
trails you can traverse during a
full day that will literally take
you from infernal depths to a
vantage point where you can
more or less kiss the sky. All
this, plus 150 miles of back-
country trails for those desiring
more legwork, and a much low-

southern entrance was wide
open, and I pitched the tent on
what with sunrise revealed it-
self to be a heavily forested
slope overlooking one of the
deep folds that crease the
mountain's flanks.

Lassen, a 10,457-foot peak
roughly three hours north of
Lake Tahoe, is not a part of the
Sierra Nevada. The Sierra
peaks are the tips of a massive
block of granite that juts up
through the Earth's crust. Las-
sen, on the other hand, is the
southernmost peak in the vol-
canic Cascade Range, and an
active link in the Pacific's infa-
mous Ring of Fire.

In an earlier incarnation Las-
sen was just a vent on the slope

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Shasta's little sister has its own charms

Uncrowded, uncommon trails lead to Lassen

■ LASSEN

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of 14,000-foot-plus Mt. Tehama. That big volcano collapsed in upon itself about 500,000 years ago, creating the enormous caldera that defines much of the national park. Lassen itself erupted in 1914, and then sporadically for seven years following. The most catastrophic of these was in 1915, when the volcano blew its top off and sent a mushroom cloud seven miles up into the sky, devastating the surrounding countryside and fomenting panic in the streets of Redding.

These days, the craggy pinnacle is dressed with snow year-round, and day hikers wind their way up the massive slope and along the boulder-strewn knife edge to take in the view that stretches, on haze-free days, to Lassen's big sister, Mt. Shasta, and the coast ranges beyond.

With only a day to take in the park — though it's certainly deserving of more — I had a lot of territory to cover. First, to the 1½-mile Bumpass Hell trail, named after the explorer who wandered into a strange countryside of noxious gases and boiling pools, one of which consumed his leg when the ground beneath his feet proved a thin crust. Remember his story, and stay on the boardwalk.

As you approach the trailhead,

the air is briefly washed with the potent bouquet of moldering eggs, and plumes of steam rise up from fenced-off areas at the side of the road. The trail follows the rim of a deep gorge, then begins to wind down through thick groves and past hot, sunny slopes. The smell becomes stronger, until a large, denuded depression becomes visible. A few minutes' travel brings you down into the midst of the large, scooped-out bowl that is Bumpass Hell.

Prodigious clouds of stinky vapor rise on the distant side of one of the gunmetal-blue pools, and, fringing the boardwalk, tiny fumaroles breathe hissing steam like boiling teapots. The mud sluggishly disgorges thick bubbles, the pools fizzing like seltzer water from gaseous emissions and heat.

Having followed the boardwalk in its entirety, the hiker can proceed to Cold Boiling Lake, named for the gaseous bubbles that percolate up through it. Limited by time, I opted for the 2½-mile hike, one way, up Lassen Peak.

From the parking lot at its foot, Lassen looms rather like the unclimbable big toe of God. It turns out the trail is quite accessible.

The last time I visited Lassen, in June of '94, the entire trail was snowed in. This time, however, the only snow clung like rags to the upper reaches of the mountain, a glacial afterthought.

The trail follows a long,

straight, steep trajectory for the first quarter-mile, perhaps, before switching back sharply. After a brief sojourn through a grove of delicious-smelling Jeffrey pine, a series of naturally terraced meadows stretched out before me, colored grass-green and lupine purple.

Panoramas revealed themselves as the ascent progressed: Looking up presented a waiting landscape of sheer slopes dotted with irregular clusters of very large boulders, some good-sized hills in their own right. Above the tree line, the landscape below became entirely visible, including the mirror blue of Lake Helen and the other peaks, much smaller and heavily forested. Markers with inscribed plaques provided historical and scientific detail along the way.

By the time the top drew near, the wind seemed to be coming down from the roof of the world. It's a distinct feeling attributable not so much to Lassen's height, but rather to the narrow summit and its lofty isolation in relation to the surrounding rockpiles.

The trail rounded the last switchback, and opened out onto a broad shoulder, which serves as the staging area for skiers clear into June. But the true summit was further still. After following a path through the deep field of snow (the one that seemed so small from a distance), I began to negotiate the treacherous, steep, rock-strewn "trail" toward the jumble of huge boulders that



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crown the peak.

Travelers are advised to approach on the left side of the jumble, a somewhat perilous route, but with two important advantages: The left side offers grand views of the jagged Chaos Crags — remnants of the last big eruption — and the right side is just plain dangerous, the trail even less clearly marked, the gravelly sand inclined to slide out from beneath your feet. This is a sobering experience at 10,000 feet, and not recommended.

Once at the top, stacks of rocks and piles of boulders make for an interesting little maze, full of spots to sit, stretch, lounge, snooze, eat lunch, lie in the sun, or simply take in the view. This is California, so a fair amount of meditation, and similar diversions, also probably go on up there. And why not? It's a potent, strong mountain. When experienced so intimately, it's a powerful antidote to urban burdens and suburban sprawl.